

T E N N E S S E E F O L K L O R E S O C I E T Y

B U L L E T I N

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CURRENT ATTITUDES TOWARD FOLKLORE

I have taken the subject, "Current Attitudes toward Folklore," because I find myself confused by the mixed results of the vast and far-ranging activity of the devotees of folklore. I number myself among the devotees, but I feel a little concerned to know how to direct my devotion so that it will count. Many others, I imagine, must suffer from a like confusion of mind, and therefore of purpose.

It seems worth while, accordingly, to try to set down the current attitudes, to define them briefly, and to estimate their relative fruitfulness.

It is somewhat difficult to analyze briefly a tradition of study and devotion that, in America, begins, let us say, with the majestic figure of Francis J. Child, and that surrounds us now with accumulating volumes of balladry and folksong, compiled largely by scholars; with the promotional labors of Mr. Lomax, Miss Jean Thomas, and others; with hill-billy radio singers; with a negroid popular music emanating chiefly from New York composers and danced to by the season's debutantes. Such phenomena are highly miscellaneous. I can do the job of analysis only by a rather bold attempt at classification. I distinguish at least three prevalent attitudes; and I can imagine, and to some extent define, a fourth attitude which I would like to see prevailing over and directing the other three.

These attitudes I name as follows: (1) The Historical-Scholarly; (2) The Enthusiastic-Promotional; (3) The Commercial-Exploitative. For the fourth attitude I have no name.

The Historical-Scholarly is of course the most respectable attitude, and naturally is the only one that attracts prestige in the academic world. It is respectable because it views balladry, folksong, and folklore as human cultural phenomena and therefore as inevitably a part of a body of knowledge which may be collected, studied, classified, collated, and annotated. The cultural phenomena bear some relationship--though perhaps a dubious and, it would almost seem, an illicit relationship--to literature. That is the more reason for studying the phenomena and putting them in order--and for rating them worth an occasional (but only an occasional) Ph. D. thesis. The historical scholar is most at ease when he can consider the phenomena as belonging to a culture safely remote in the past. He does not want to be confronted with lively, fluid phenomena, for that kind of phenomena makes him nervous and uncertain of his conclusions, if he has any.

The studies of Child seem to assume that balladry is a dead phenomenon. He moves among his variant versions with the kind of safety enjoyed by an archaeologist moving among his artifacts. Child is in fact a kind of archaeologist, with a mixture of anthropologist. Out of his attitude comes his obsession that he must finally and definitely establish the canon of English and Scottish ballads, fix the exact number to be admitted to the canon, and reject intruders and impostors. His eminent colleagues in the American field, Gummere and Kittredge, follow his lead obediently. They excavate and comment the remains of balladry very much as Schliemann and his successors excavated and commented the ruins of Troy. And so Mr. Kittredge, in 1902, almost triumphantly announced that ballad-making was a "closed account."

The labors of these men to a large degree have determined the course of ballad and folklore study until recent years. We pay tribute to their power when we gather today in the character of a learned society, dutifully presenting papers which embody our researches, which inevitably put great emphasis upon collecting. By far the greater number of state and regional collections of balladry follow the model of Child, even to his system of numbers and letters. Apparently the effort of the collectors is first of all to see what "Child ballads" can be recovered, in text and music, in a given region, and to get as many versions as possible--garbled and worthless fragments often being recorded just as dutifully as the best versions.

The enormous conservative value of such work is self-evident and calls for no argument. We owe ballad scholars a considerable debt both for the material that they have preserved and for the insight they give us, through their accompanying studies, into the folk-tradition itself, as a historical and cultural fact. But there, I am afraid, the value stops. The conservation after all is limited, for the ballads are conserved very much as specimens in a museum are conserved. Ballad scholarship, as such, seems to have relatively little impact upon our contemporary culture--nothing like the impact that Bishop Percy's and Walter Scott's collecting had upon the culture of their day. Ballad scholarship may conserve; but it does not transmit. And a folklore that is really to count must transmit, in other places than graduate seminars. I feel that the Historical-Scholarly attitude, legitimate and valuable though it may be, clearly leads us now to an undue emphasis on collecting per se. It leads to the madness of

accumulating, ad nauseam, hundreds of slightly different versions of Lord Randal and Barbara Allen, with which we are familiar to the point of tedium. And worst of all, it diverts the devotees of folklore from other possibilities which might conceivably bear a different fruit from doctoral dissertations.

The Enthusiastic-Promotional attitude is, I suppose, in part a reaction against the excessive frigidities of historical scholarship. I have heard it said that a certain notable professor at an Eastern university, who edits ballad collections and directs ballad research, does not himself like ballads; and if one of his students begins to sing a ballad or practice a ballad air on the piano, he makes his excuses and leaves. The Enthusiastic-Promotional attitude is the extreme opposite of this attitude. The devotee of balladry or folksong becomes a zealot who threatens to cheapen the whole subject with too much unrestrained admiration. The mark of the Enthusiastic-Promotional attitude is attempt at popularization, generally through books that drop the paraphernalia of scholarship and deliberately try to win an audience. Of this sort, on the whole, are Mr. Lomax's collections and Carl Sandburg's The American Songbag. There is certainly much clear gain here: the enthusiasts are really trying to transmit as well as to conserve, and if they overreach themselves at times, it is the defect of their good qualities; the attempt itself is healthy. But it is still not quite good enough, and the reason why it is not good enough is easy to find.

The popularizations try to win an audience--but what audience? They are aimed at the sophisticated urban audience, the audience with money enough to buy the books and with a taste jaded enough to welcome for the moment (but only for the moment) the novel bit

of antiquity, of local color, of "regional" quaintness. A moment before, the same audience welcomed Viennese light opera; tomorrow it will welcome something else, and Lomax and Sandburg will be back numbers.

The situation is more clearly revealed when we turn to the somewhat weaker members of this tribe. Dorothy Scarborough's On the Trail of Negro Folksong and A Song-Catcher in Southern Mountains are the romantic adventures of a Columbia professor who happens to be collecting folksongs instead of early American glass. And Jean Thomas's books, it seems to me, deliberately cater to the urban notion of balladry as "quaint." Such works involve a condescending attitude, or are willing to come to terms with a condescending attitude. I believe they are dangerous examples. They, too, have relatively little impact upon our culture as a whole; and what impact they do have is specious, inasmuch as they indulge in a theatrical display, and reduce folksong to a kind of parlor vaudeville, a very minor form of entertainment, or at best a fleeting escapism.

The third attitude, the Commercial-Exploitative, needs little definition. At its best it may give us the finished professional performance of folksong, or an occasional appearance of folksong (reformed and furnished with a modern piano accompaniment) upon the noted singer's concert program. And I should certainly concede that, at its very best, it invites us to witness folksong impinging fruitfully upon art-song, in such a way as to give an attitude that might be called the Artistic-Exploitative. On the other hand, at its worst it gives us the hill-billy singer and the hill-billy band, from whom we generally get only the lower levels

of folk performance, and very rarely any performance that reflects the genuine worth and dignity of folksong. Radio performances by hill-billy singers notoriously run to sentimental ditties, and hardly ever to the true ballad, the really convincing folksong. And what has happened, under the commercial auspices of New York, Harlem, and night club orchestras to the secular or sacred song of the negro is too obvious to need comment. It is again an exploitation that caters to the passing urban mood and has little to do with folksong as we know it in its traditional haunts. It is a vulgarizing process.

All these attitudes have one characteristic in common. Their approach is external to the tradition and essential being of folksong and folklore. They may in one way or another conserve, or at least embalm, the folk-product; they do not transmit it, except at great expense to the object; and even though at times they may, by some rare accident, transmit it, they cannot genuinely cherish it. To transmit the folk-product effectively and to cherish it genuinely, the impetus must come from within the folk itself.

The fourth attitude (which I have spoken of above) would therefore draw its strength from within the folk tradition. It is a real question whether such transmission can be much assisted by a self-conscious effort on our part. Yet I believe it has been done in the past, and may be done again. Why are the Danish ballads available to us in a more fully rounded, less mangled form than the English and Scottish ballads? We are told that the preservation is due to the devotion of certain noble Danish ladies who took care to write down ballads. But these ladies wrote down the ballads that they might be remembered, not that they might be collected; and,

still more concretely, that such ballads might be the better performed in Danish households. If we preserve ballads in order to learn them and perform them (as some of us in this very Society are doing today), then we join in the folk process--we become the folk.

And how does it happen that the Confederate song, "I'm a Good Old Rebel," though composed by a known author and indeed published soon after its composition, became a Southern folksong rather than a merely literary relic? Aside from its intrinsic appeal and character, it became a folksong because the author let his song go, to whoever would like it, for what it was worth to Confederates, not for what it was worth to a music publisher. We too may become contributors to folksong on one condition: we must be nameless, we must let the song go, we must set up no copyright claim.

The roots of the best attitude toward folksong, it seems to me, lie in such circumstances. And if such views have merit, we ought to become cherishers by participation in at least as much degree as we are cherishers by recording and collecting.

Perhaps we can also do certain other things in a concerted way--things which will do good, or at least work no harm. We can strive to inculcate respect for folksong among those who already possess it naturally. We can strive to see that love of old song is not wholly replaced by love of new song. That means, certainly, that our schools should negatively refrain from some of their customary educational policies--especially their callous assumption that the first duty of the school is to weed out ruthlessly all elements of non-literate culture and replace them by completely literate requirements. And yet I hardly know whether we dare

risk the cherishing of folksong by the schools as a planned and definite part of the school program itself. The schools have been so guilty, in the past, of diluting and vulgarizing what they attempt to convey that I am almost ready to say that they should not be trusted. I am tempted to declare that I would rather risk leaving the preservation of folksong to the old, anonymous, accidental process, even under perilous modern conditions, than to risk giving it a place in a curriculum or activities program administered by the certificated products of our higher educational institutions. The point is debatable. But undoubtedly our concern should somehow be directed toward the young folks rather than, as now, exclusively toward the old folks from whom we collect such interesting examples of folksong and folktale. The young folks should have their part in all undertakings--festivals, fairs, entertainments, competitions--which strive to bring folksong into greater respect.

Back of all this lies the soil in which the tradition is to be nurtured. The true cherishers of the folk tradition are, first, the family, in its traditional role, securely established on the land, in occupations not hostile to song and dance and tale; and, second, the stable community which is really a community and not a mere real estate development. If we cannot cherish these, we cannot hope to cherish folksong; and probably we cannot long cherish the high forms of art that feed upon folk-tradition; and we may even prove ourselves ignorant of what life really is.

Donald Davidson

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The Leading Article

The article entitled "Current Attitudes Toward Folklore" is a printing of the paper read by Professor Donald Davidson of Vanderbilt University at the meeting of the Tennessee Folklore Society in Nashville on November 9. We are glad to have the privilege of publishing it both because of its careful and cogent style and because it raises pertinent questions as to the motives underlying interest in folklore.

We venture to suggest a descriptive title for Mr. Davidson's fourth and preferred attitude, the Participating-Propagative

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attitude, for, if we get his point, it is the advocacy of the attitude toward folklore in which the folklorist becomes himself one of the folk by placing himself in the situation which produced the folk material; thus passing on through himself and to others the creative principle that was in the process at the beginning.

With this in mind we draw at least this direct suggestion as to the activities of our society, that it would be practical and of great benefit to include in our program activities in which there is a genuine effort to develop participation in folk presentations. At the Nashville meeting there were three very fine examples of this, (1) Mrs. L. L. McDowell sang in delightfully authentic style a number of folk songs, (2) A group of Peabody College students under the direction of Professor Irving Wolfe sang a number of madrigals not only with great faithfulness to the tradition but with a spirit of fine enjoyment, (3) Miss Bess Alice Owens, presenting some general matters about Cumberland Mountain folklore, distributed mimeographed sheets carrying the text of a few ballads and led the whole group in the singing of them.

7 We shall hope for more suggestions and for direct offers of help toward putting more of this sort of Participation into the coming programs. We hope our members will be free to make such suggestions and that those who can will encourage such activities in their communities and will let us all share in the results of their experience.

On Saturday, November 9, the seventh annual meeting of the Tennessee Folklore Society was held in Nashville at Peabody College, with Vanderbilt University and Peabody College acting as joint hosts.

Because of the disability of President L. L. McDowell, Miss Frieda Johnson of Peabody College, second Vice-President, presided. The program was very full but of pleasing variety. It is given here:

Morning Session

A Glimpse of Macon County Folklore
Mr. Lewis D. Bandy, Lafayette
Marriage Lore
Mrs. Hayden Young, Cookeville
Madrigals
Peabody College Department of Music
The Background of the Beale Street Blues
Miss Maude Green, Whitehaven
Secondary Christian Names in an East Tennessee Community
Mr. Edwin J. Best, Knoxville
Folklore of the Cumberlands
Miss Bess Alice Owens, Pikeville, Kentucky
Current Attitudes Toward Folklore
Mr. Donald Davidson, Nashville
Folksong Presentation
Mrs. L. L. McDowell, McMinnville

Afternoon Session

Folklore as a Foundation in Public School Education
Mr. Charles S. Pendleton, Nashville
Early Folk Singing in Tennessee
Mr. George Pullen Jackson, Nashville
Some Early Tennessee Riddles
Miss Mildred Haun, Franklin
Musical Anachronisms in The New Harp of Columbia
Miss Dorothy Horne, Maryville
Some Sidelights on Early Medical Practices in Tennessee
Mr. E. G. Rogers, Carthage

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The officers for 1941 elected at the meeting are President, Edwin C. Kirkland, Knoxville; First Vice-president, George Pullen Jackson, Nashville; Second Vice-president, Miss Maude Green, Whitehaven; Third Vice-president, Mrs. Hayden Young, Cookeville; Secretary, Edwin R. Hunter, Maryville; Treasurer, Miss Geneva Anderson, Maryville. The 1941 meeting will be held somewhere in the eastern part of the State.

Tennessee Folklore Society

Membership List

List of persons who paid dues for both 1940 and 1941 or for one or the other of those years.

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